

Effective communication

How to make a complaint sandwich



RELATIONSHIPS
With Joanne Wilson

QUICK show of hands – who likes criticism? If you raised your hand, I'm not sure I believe you. Anyone who has been in a relationship can probably think of a few times when they've given their partner feedback only to have it explode in their face. Or, just as likely, been the one to blow up. Or, most likely, done both. In the same conversation.

Feedback is something that is a lot easier to give than to receive, right? Let's take a look into how to make feedback easier to swallow. You can even try this on your boss.

A "complaint sandwich" is basically a structure for your feedback (or criticism, complaint, gripe etc) that will make it not only easier for the receiver to listen to but inspire change.

Or at least not explode in your face.

A complaint sandwich requires three ingredients:

- ▶ A positive statement
- ▶ The complaint
- ▶ A second positive statement.

The biggest problem to receiving feedback is feeling attacked. With the complaint sandwich, the meat of the problem is wedged between two positive comments. This puts a structure around the complaint, which makes it feel less like a personal assault and more like, well, feedback.

You start with something you appreciate about the situation or person and end with reassurance to calm your stress responses.

If you're thinking to yourself, "Great, next time he leaves the toilet seat up I'll just say 'John, you're a wonderful father. If you leave the lid up again I will burn everything you own and leave you. But I really like what you've done with your beard,'" then I have some sad news.



▶ A complaint sandwich requires three ingredients: a positive statement, the complaint and a second positive statement.

Yes, the complaint sandwich will make it easier to swallow. No, you can't just say whatever you want in the middle. That would be like biting into a sandwich and finding a cockroach in the middle – you're not going to be happy about it.

How to make the perfect filling

Prepare: Before you open your mouth, remember you're speaking to someone you love (unless they are your boss). Consider the outcome you're seeking.

One complaint at a time: A complaint sandwich is best as a toasted cheese sandwich. Not cheese and ham or cheese and tomato or with that tinned braised beef I like. Just cheese. Piling in multiple complaints makes them mash together and leads to

the recipient feeling attacked. Stick to one issue at a time.

Make it timely: When they're late for work or there's man flu about, it's not the best time. Furthermore, avoid complaining about something that happened six months ago. You may well know the momentum a thought can get when you've stewed over it for way too long only to have it boil over in an unrelated conversation. Approach them while it's fresh in your memory.

This is what I felt: Take responsibility for your emotions. Avoid telling your partner what they are feeling ("you" talk) and speak about your feelings. For example, I feel hurt, happy, scared, frustrated etc, as compared to what you'd automatically want to say, such as "You're lazy" or "You don't seem to care".

Keep it civil: Remain as calm and even-tempered as possible. Notice your tone, breathing, heart rate and triggers from their expression. The goal of a complaint is to bring attention to an issue instead of trying to make them feel bad.

It is more about what they did: Separate the behaviour from the person. Describe exactly what you saw or heard and don't make assumptions. For example, "I heard the door slam."

This is the meaning it had for me: We all interpret and perceive things differently. By saying "What I understood about this is ..." allows you to share your interpretation of the situation without accusing your partner.

Ask for what you need: Make sure you tell your partner what you need that would help you feel better. You are entitled to respectfully make a request that can avoid the person feeling helpless as to what to do with your feedback.

Forgive: Once you've communicated your thoughts and feelings, then invite peace with forgiveness. You've done what you can to make the situation better and it's time to let it go.

With these tips, you'll be on your way to providing – and perhaps receiving – more palatable feedback in the future.

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